

What's Sin Got to Do with It?

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The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 and Romans 5:12-19 and Matthew 4:1-11

Lent, which began just a few days ago on Ash Wednesday, can be understood in many, many ways, and we will explore a variety of those dimensions over the coming weeks. A clear and strong theme is wilderness, the wilderness experienced by Jesus and the wildernesses we experience. On Wednesday, we shared this poem by Malcolm Guite, called "The Word in the Wilderness." It's worth hearing again:

"Receive this cross of ash upon your brow
Brought from the burning of Palm Sunday's cross;
The forests of the world are burning now
And you make late repentance for the loss.
But all the trees of God would clap their hands,
The very stones themselves would shout and sing,
If you could covenant to love these lands
And recognize in Christ their lord and king.
He sees the slow destruction of those trees,
He weeps to see the ancient places burn,
And still you make what purchases you please
And still to dust and ashes you return.
But Hope could rise from ashes even now
Beginning with this sign upon your brow."

Perhaps you've heard of Aaron Rodgers, quarterback for the Green Bay Packers. Rodgers is extremely talented, and occasionally accomplished, with many other qualities, depending on your perspective. You might have read that just a week or so ago, Rodgers went on something called a "darkness retreat," which is exactly what it sounds like: a prolonged stay in a space completely devoid of light. Rodgers went to Oregon for four days to meditate, reflect on his mega-million-dollar future. A 300-square foot dark space with no phone or human contact

other than meals being brought to him. Some days that sounds atrocious; other days it sounds fabulous.

Here I will lump together terms like desert and wilderness, though I know they are not the same, yet in terms of Lent, the effect is the same. We've all experienced, therefore, a time in the wilderness, a season in the desert. Some have been by our own choice, like Aaron Rodgers. Some have been imposed, like six months of unemployment. Some have been welcomed, an intentional opportunity to regroup. Some have been anything but welcomed, weeks and months in the wilderness of chemotherapy. Some wilderness journeys last a very long time. For others, desert time can simply be the 30-minute walk you take each day along the Wissahickon. The wilderness journey can be physical or emotional or spiritual. And though it impacts others, and though you can feel as if you are in the wilderness even when you are in a crowd, loneliness, solitude is a common denominator.

"Jesus walked that lonesome valley," we will sing in just a bit, an old folk hymn. And he did. And we will as will.

Jesus regularly went off on his own to pray and connect with God. That is a good reminder for us, the need to recharge and refuel when faced with something big. But today is different for him, for us. In Mark's gospel, the Spirit *drives* him into the wilderness. In Luke's account, and Matthew's, the Spirit leads him into the wilderness. A slightly different inflection.

Attend to what happens. First, we are told, he fasted. Forty days and forty nights. All of the Lenten traditions captured in a few words. The length of the season that we now place before the events of Holy Week, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and Holy Saturday, leading to Easter. While this wilderness experience happens at the outset of his adult ministry, we have moved it symbolically to the end, as much as a time of preparation for us as for him.

And fasting. Fasting, though not defined here, we can presume no food or drink. It is a practice meant to focus, to purify. The tradition has done much with this concept, and not always good. Turned it into a form of punishment, of self-sacrifice and self-denial. This is why Lent is often misunderstood. At the Ash Wednesday service, we looked at several passages that already – even while it was happening – help us to reframe fasting. When we do it for show, we were

reminded, or do it while ignoring the deeper elements of faith like practicing compassion and kindness – it becomes just another performative exercise.

In recent times, much has been written about “taking something up,” rather than “giving something up.” Take up daily period of prayer, or regular scripture reading, or another practice that brings focus to an important aspect of faith. Maybe you do need to give up chocolate, or screen-time, or something else, if that helps you to recalibrate. But Jesus fasted, for forty days and forty nights, and he was famished, we are told, when it was all over.

As I said, wilderness journeys, a season in the desert, can happen for many reasons – good and bad – and many things can happen during them, again, good or bad. Our wilderness, desert experiences, will never be what is about to happen to Jesus, at least precisely. The tempter appears. There is no background given. The tempter will, obviously, tempt, and in the rest of this morning’s passage, you will notice, the tempter is identified as the devil. No hoofs and horns and pitchfork, just a conversation partner with Jesus, though Jesus identifies the tempter as Satan near the end of all of this.

The tempter tempts, as we said, in order to do several things – first, to offer Jesus escape from this wilderness experience, and then, increasingly, to offer him power and authority. Three times, three being a good biblical number, three times Jesus is offered something either within his own capacity or the tempter’s.

- First, because he is fasting, he is tempted to turn the rocks and stones around him into food, to assuage his famished state. Have you ever said something like “I would kill for something to eat?” This is about like that – I would accept temptation for something to eat, and apparently Jesus has the ability to do that, the divine ability. But he says no. He says no by referring back to the Book of Deuteronomy for a direct refutation of the temptation. In fact, you will note that each time Jesus is tempted he reaches back into the tradition to bring to that present moment important insights. So no stone into bread. There are more important things than food.
- The tempter whisks him off to Jerusalem, mysteriously, like a scene from The Matrix, to the heights of the temple. Now the temptations take on a

grander scale. First, leap off this wall and the angels will prevent you from falling to your death. No, he says – don't test God.

- Then to a high mountain. Worship me and you can have all of this. No, he says – don't *be* God, don't replace God. And again, with appropriate biblical references that place Jesus firmly in the flow of the tradition.

Three opportunities. Three rejections. The tempter abruptly disappears, and Jesus is back in the wilderness, where angels cared for him, food and drink, presumably, and perhaps more comfort than that for his undoubtedly tested and exhausted body and soul.

As I said, we embark on wilderness journeys, sojourns in the wilderness, for many reasons. Good and bad. And from some, even the so-called "bad" ones, we might emerge for the better, though that's a dynamic we need to be mindful of and careful about, as if self-chosen punishment and deprivation in and of itself is positive. I have never been a proponent of the phrase "that which doesn't kill us makes us stronger." If we go off to the wilderness in search of something, to find something, good. But there are other times when the wilderness, the desert, is unwanted and unwelcome. We are confronted – as Jesus was – by what I will call sin, and what I will try to unpack for a moment, at least.

I don't know what you think of when you think of sin, if you think of sin. There are the seven deadly sins: Lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, pride. There are sins of commission – things we do that we shouldn't. There are sins of omission, things we don't do that we should. Jesus was tempted to sin – to use his divinity to do a parlor trick, and, more seriously, to test God, to replace God. Those temptations will not be ours, or they won't be on that same scale. Our understanding has evolved in many ways, and is evolving. Some of that is helpful, I believe, some not so much.

Chelsey Harmon writes that "At their heart, each of these temptations (that Jesus faces) are ones we face, in degrees, every day. They hit on core human needs and fears, and highlight how quickly things run afoul when we are not rooted in Christ and are disconnected from the Holy Spirit who is still-with-us."

Harmon continues: "We may not literally be starving or have the ability to miraculously turn rocks into bread, but we do need to reckon for our strong

human preference for the easy way out of hardship or want to solve our problems with quick fixes.”

And of the third temptation, Harmon writes: “...it encapsulates the root of the other two: proof of belonging and security, but gained through power over others; a dangerous cocktail of fear, low-self-esteem and selfishness mixed with opportunism and immediate results.”

Fear, low-self-esteem and selfishness mixed with opportunism and immediate results. Those might not be the seven deadly sins, but I can almost guarantee that those are temptations we face, each of us, each day.

Perhaps Lent can be for us a wilderness journey filled with introspection, to look at ourselves with honesty and integrity, to discern where temptation – grand or nuanced – has taken hold of us.

Or, perhaps Lent can be for us a wilderness journey filled not with temptation, but an invitation. In solitude or silence or simplicity – and perhaps prayer – to connect and re-connect with God and your own soul.

And to look at sin, not in some old school clichéd sense, but as all those things – behaviors or beliefs or patterns – that do not allow us to live as God fully intends, for ourselves and others. That might be an addiction. It might be a fear or insecurity. It might be a belief. It might be convincing ourselves that we don’t need God, as the serpent sought to do with Eve and Adam. Use this season to explore, and to reshape and to be transformed.

Whether you can join our Lenten mini-retreat on March 26 or not, I would commend to you Rachel Srubas’ book called “The Desert of Compassion,” a series of daily brief reflections. For Ash Wednesday, Rachel wrote that “the desert is a paradox, a place and a spiritual condition in which terror leads to beauty and aridity bears fruit.” She goes on: “God means even now to lead you into the desert of compassion, the place within you where hurt gives rise to hope and devastation births the desire for redemption.”

The desert pilgrimage leads toward a compassionate life. Compassion for yourself. Compassion for God’s people and God’s world. Our continuing journey

begins again today, with the hope that the angels will attend to us, and the trust that Jesus journeys with us, always ahead of us, and always with us. Amen.